

Sunday, August 19, 2018
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15 (Year B)
John 6.51-58
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Ooo, gross!” That is what the original audience was actually saying when they heard today’s portion of the Bread of Life Discourse. “The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” (Jn 6.52). To which Jesus replies, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6.53). In their minds, what Jesus has been saying goes from difficult to understand to impossible. He started off with “I am the bread of life.” Then he moved on to “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” Which then became “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

They are initially freaked out by this talk of him being the bread of life morphing into that bread being his flesh. But now, he goes one step further with talk of eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood. This is the first time Jesus brings up blood. For anyone, particularly Jesus’ Jewish audience, the thought of eating human flesh is bad enough. Drinking the blood of any human, particularly that of the Son of Man, is horrifying.

From the beginning of their collective memory, the consumption of blood—the blood of any animal—has been taboo. And the thought of consuming human blood never would have crossed their minds. For right after the Great Flood, God issued the emphatic command “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen 9.3).

The Jewish understanding is that blood carries life—is the animating life force of all animals. That’s why under the kosher laws blood is removed so as not to take in the “life” that would otherwise have been consumed. In Jewish teaching, blood is always equated with life. All life belongs to God, and it is profane to consume that which belongs exclusively to God. To further emphasize the point, when God gave the Law to the people in the wilderness, he declared, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it’s the blood that makes atonement” (Lev 17.11). In this law, blood is viewed as a life that is given as payment for sin. The life’s blood of the sacrificed animal is poured on the altar. It is not the animal that serves as the sacrifice per se. The true sacrifice is its blood. Blood that is viewed as a ransom, taking the place of the blood of the penitent, to release the penitent from the bonds of their sin. To bring about atonement.

Because of the sanctity of blood, of the prohibition against consuming blood, violation of this dietary law regarding blood meant being cut off from the community. A stark punishment for a people devoted to family and community. For a people wandering in the harsh wilderness where community is necessary for survival.

Despite these prohibitions, Jesus chooses the imagery of eating his flesh and drinking his blood as a sign of relationship and union with him. Of relationship between God and his people. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (Jn 6.56).

Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will abide—will live, will have life—in him. And he will have life in them and through them. Aside from the whole blood thing, this concept of abiding—having life—in Jesus and them having life in him would have been unfathomable.

Of course, at the time these words were spoken, the people could not have known what would happen. That Jesus would give his flesh and his blood on the cross for the forgiveness of all their sins. An action that resulted in them indeed having life in him and through him—eternal life. And they could not have known that his body and blood would become symbols of that sacrifice through the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

And it wasn't just the Jews that had a hard time with what Jesus was saying. We know from historical records from the first couple of centuries of the modern era that one of the many reasons for the persecution of the early Christians and the Roman Empire's attempts to wipe out the Church was their "immoral activities." One of the main misunderstandings being the perception that Christians engaged in cannibalism. A perception based on similar views to those of the original hearers of the Bread of Life Discourse. And even today, there are some who do not quite understand these seemingly strange words of Jesus to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

This side of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we who are his followers of course view things differently. While we still are repulsed by and have prohibitions against the consumption of human flesh and blood, we see Christ's body and blood in a very different light, through the sacrament we celebrate every week.

While all four Gospels record accounts of Jesus' Last Supper on Maundy Thursday—the night before his crucifixion—John's Gospel does not include an account of the institution of the Lord's Supper as do the other three Gospels: "Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Mt 26.26-28). Words we use even now when we make Eucharist.

As you may recall from the Maundy Thursday service, Jesus' emphasis on that night, according to John's Gospel, is the washing of his disciples' feet and a new commandment to love one another. But Gospel today's passage, with its command to eat his body and drink his blood, reminds us of the Last Supper. Of the Eucharist. The words we hear in today's reading are the closest thing John has to an institution of that sacramental meal. In the command to eat his flesh, to drink his blood, we think of Eucharist in which we eat his body in the form of bread—"the body of Christ, the bread of heaven". And we drink his blood in the form of wine—"the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation".

As with so many things Jesus said and did during his life, he turned things upside down. Through Christ's death on the cross, those qualities that make blood unfit for consumption according to kosher law are precisely what makes Jesus' flesh and blood fit for our consumption.

Blood is sacred because it is life, is life-giving. It is only offered up as a means of receiving God's atonement for our sins. To consume it is forbidden, resulting in expulsion from the community. That is the old covenant. But under the new covenant, Christ offers his body and blood as a sacrifice on the cross. In so doing, his body and blood give new meaning to life, a new way of receiving atonement, a new means of being a community. His body and blood, in the form of bread and wine, become the outward sacramental sign of the forgiveness of our sins. The forgiveness that was accomplished through Christ's actual body and blood sacrificed on the cross. And with it, a reminder of the new and eternal life that is promised through his saving act. In this, he becomes part of us. And we, likewise, become a part of him—the body of Christ. We are transformed—incorporated into the body that is the community of his followers whose members individually and collectively become his physical body in the world.

Jesus invites us into this passage, into an intimate relationship and communion with him in which he nourishes us, heals us, forgives us, and gives us new life. Even more so, he becomes part of us just as we become a part of him. This is what happens in Eucharist when we eat the bread and drink the wine which have been consecrated to become the Real Presence—the body and blood of Christ.

This is our most sacred act. One we have the privilege of sharing in every time we come to this place. Let us now prepare ourselves to receive what Christ gave us on the cross and continues to give us every time we approach God's altar—his body and blood, given for your life, for my life, for the life of our community, and for the life of the world.